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## Chapter 1

# Congregational Studies: Taking Stock

*Linda Woodhead, Mathew Guest and Karin Tusting*

By the mid-1980s the field of congregational studies in the English-speaking world had produced a sufficiently rich crop for Hopewell (1987) to offer a typological survey. Hopewell divided the studies into four types: contextual, mechanistic, organic and cultural. He himself championed and helped to shape the last approach, particularly within ecclesiastical and theological circles. Since Hopewell wrote, the field has grown considerably, and has taken directions he could not have anticipated. It is now fed by many disciplines including theology, religious studies, sociology, anthropology, organizational studies, linguistics, social theory and gender studies. It takes shape in many institutional settings, not only in theological colleges, seminaries and churches, but in university departments and by way of funded research projects. Its practitioners range from clergy and lay people seeking to understand and resource their own congregations, to social scientists seeking to discern the fate of 'community' in late-capitalist societies.

This chapter provides a fresh survey of congregational studies which takes account of developments in the last couple of decades, and modifies and develops Hopewell's typology in light of them.<sup>1</sup> It focuses primarily on congregational studies from the UK, including books, influential articles and PhD theses.<sup>2</sup> Coverage of congregational studies in the USA is limited to studies that have been influential on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>3</sup>

The typology offered here divides congregational studies into two main categories, extrinsic and intrinsic, and a number of subcategories:

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is based on a survey of relevant literature undertaken by the authors, its bibliography compiled with the advice of several long-standing experts in the field. We would particularly like to thank David Martin and Mike Hornsby-Smith for their invaluable assistance.

<sup>2</sup> Our main criteria of selection were influence in the wider field and the quality of the study: we were particularly concerned to include those studies that had contributed something new to the field.

<sup>3</sup> There is no comprehensive historical account of congregational studies in the USA, though a sketch is offered in Wind and Lewis (1994, Vol II, pp. 1–20) and, of course, in Hopewell (1987).

<b>Extrinsic Studies</b>	<b>Intrinsic Studies</b>
Communitarian	Self-contained
Church-growth	Typologizing
Organizational	Contextualizing
Church-health	Multi-focused
Theological	

Extrinsic congregational studies are those whose study of a congregation or congregations has some broader good, such as a concern to assess the role of congregations in the generation of social capital, or a desire to enrich theological reflection with 'congregational voices'. Intrinsic studies are those that study congregations for their own sake and for the sake of understanding them. Some intrinsic studies focus narrowly on a congregation or congregations alone, others focus more broadly on congregations in relation to their wider context. Obviously, both of these categories are ideal-types, since most extrinsic studies also seek to achieve some understanding for its own sake, and most intrinsic studies have some wider agenda, even if this remains unspecified. But the fact remains that peculiarities of overall aim, method and style allow most congregational studies to be placed within one of these two main types.

This chapter traces the development of both types of congregational study in Britain and argues that a first phase of activity which was primarily extrinsic in orientation has given way since the 1970s to a second phase that is characterized by a predominantly intrinsic approach. It compares this situation with that in the United States, suggesting that the field there has been more progressive in its development and has tended to adopt a largely extrinsic approach throughout. In its conclusion the chapter attempts to explain this contrast by reference to the very different religious contexts in which congregational studies now takes place on either side of the Atlantic.

## **Extrinsic Studies**

### *Communitarian*

The first significant congregational studies in the UK appeared in the 1950s. Though they were written from a variety of perspectives and had very different aims, many shared the assumption that community was in danger of breaking down under the pressures of modernization, particularly rapid industrialization and urbanization. Attention therefore turned to congregations as exemplars of community, as 'intermediate institutions' whose health was intimately bound up with that of civil society, and as places where claims about the breakdown or survival of community could be tested. These were the first 'extrinsic' studies of congregations. Their motive was to understand and help preserve healthy human community.

This communitarian agenda was shared by two superficially very different sorts of congregational study. The first, mainly secular, took place under the

auspices of 'community studies'. In the UK the Institute of Community Studies was established in 1953 (Willmott, 1985). Its methods were informed by anthropology and sociology, but its aim was to influence public policy. It was influenced by the politics of the 'post-war consensus' and the establishment of the British welfare state. Studies associated with this movement typically took a town or suburb as a focus and engaged in intensive (usually team-based) research in that locale over a number of years. The better-known studies include Williams (1956), Young and Willmott (1957) and Stacey (1960). Their aim was to build up what would now be called a 'thick' description of the community, and to assess the impact of social change. Study of religion – almost exclusively of Christian churches and chapels – was often an integral part of the task. The primary interest was not congregational life per se, but the role and place of congregations within the wider community. (While such studies have a great deal in common with the American tradition of community studies which perhaps begins with the Lynds' pioneering portrait of Middletown (1929), the latter sought 'maximum objectivity' through the adoption of 'the approach of the cultural anthropologist' (p. 3), and did not entirely share the socio-political agenda of later British community studies. It was, in other words, more 'intrinsic' than 'extrinsic'.)

The second, contemporaneous, form of congregational study in the UK also had a left-wing bias, but was Christian rather than secular in origin and motivation. It shared the sense that modern Western society was in danger of becoming atomized and individualistic and that men and women craved a fellowship that was rapidly disappearing, but sought the solution not in public policy but in Christian churches. Here, it was argued, could be found the true community around which society could be re-formed. This was as much a programme as a hypothesis, and its proponents tended to be priests within a broadly Catholic tradition of Christianity (which included Anglo-Catholics from the Anglican Church as well as Roman Catholics).<sup>4</sup> In the 1950s, a number began to publish studies of their own congregations and initiatives within them. The Abbé Michonneau's *Revolution in a City Parish* was translated into English in 1950, and inspired a number of British studies, including Southcott's *The Parish Comes Alive* (1956). Southcott quotes with approval Michonneau's exhortation that 'every parish [should] strive to make its liturgy splendid and full of meaning... [that] each parish [should] strive to make of itself a real community' (p. 19), and he documents the attempted implementation of this programme in his (Anglican) parish in Halton, Leeds. While Southcott does not offer a comprehensive congregational study, he describes and records the main services, regular activities, chief organizations and initiatives of his parish. His intention is to inspire other clergy, and thereby spearhead a movement of community renewal both in church and wider

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<sup>4</sup> The roots of this movement can be traced as far back as the late nineteenth century in the work of Christian socialist writers like F. D. Maurice, but they took shape in the first part of the twentieth in a pan-European call for 'liturgical renewal'.

society.<sup>5</sup> Related issues are addressed in Wickham's *Church and People in an Industrial City* (1957). Wickham explores how churches may facilitate urban mission by offering an effective response to the fragmentation of community in industrial Sheffield. While again not concerned with congregational specifics – presenting an historical rather than a sociological account – he conceives an ecclesiological agenda which has congregational reform at its centre (Wickham, 1957, p. 225).

From the Roman Catholic side, Ward's study of a Catholic parish in Liverpool (Ward, 1958; 1961) drew on observation, document analysis and informal interviewing in a more rigorous way than Southcott, reflecting the achievements of the growing field of Roman Catholic sociology in Europe. Ward found parishioners to have a strong individual ('vertical') identification with the parish, but weak communal ('horizontal') social bonds between one another. This was explained in terms of the ecclesiastical organization of the parish; strong individual relationships between priests and people, fostered particularly by a system of regular parish visiting; and the structure of parish societies formed largely from a small core of parish activists. Ward's (1958) conclusion draws out a number of points relating the research to contemporary conditions in urban communities and questioning the long-term viability of 'the parish' as an organizational unit in these settings. In the USA at the same time, the most significant Roman Catholic congregational study was Fichter's intensive study of a parish in New Orleans, which drew on detailed factual data concerning the parish, its priests and people and an account of religious attitudes (1951). While the full study was never published, Fichter (1954) contains reflections on various aspects of parish life arising from the study. Both of these works remain influential today.

In the UK the tradition of Roman Catholic sociology has been advanced by Hornsby-Smith. In *The Changing Parish* (1989) he constructs ideal-types of parish, priest and parishioner for the pre- and post-Vatican II periods in the Church, drawing largely on two previously published studies: one of a traditional parish in the North Midlands studied by Leslie (1986), and one of (his own) parish as described by its former parish priest (O'Sullivan, 1979), in which post-Vatican II liturgical and administrative changes were experienced as positive charismatic renewal. These data are brought together with other academic studies and reports from the USA, Australia, continental Europe and the Philippines to produce a picture of the parish as a focus of conflict between rival models of the Church. More recently Tusting (2000) addresses the role of written text in the construction of identity in a Catholic parish, again proceeding from participant observation in several of the communities which make up a large parish. Her study considers the roles of different types of written text in the construction of community identities. Both the latter studies

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<sup>5</sup> Gray (1986) provides a history of the 'parish communion' movement in the Church of England, and suggests reasons for its demise. See also Penhale (1986), who offers a comprehensive bibliography of works dealing with Anglo-Catholic congregations (pp. 159–60).

move away from earlier extrinsic concerns about the health of church and society towards an 'intrinsic' desire to understand contemporary Catholic congregations for their own sake.

### *Church-growth*

If the characteristic contribution to the development of congregational studies on the part of British Catholic Christianity was made by community-focused studies, the equivalent contribution from American evangelical Protestantism came from church-growth literature. This too had its origins in the 1950s, and generated an extrinsic form of congregational study. In this case, however, the preoccupation was not with the health of communities, whether local, civic or national, but with the size of congregations and the salvation of souls. The desirability of church growth is axiomatic within the evangelical worldview, with each new individual brought into the church representing another soul brought within the ambit of salvation. Research is therefore focused on investigating the factors which cause growth and decline in order to offer practical guidance on how to maximize church numbers.

Church-growth literature not only originated in the USA, but has always been more influential there than in Europe. Its pioneer was McGavran, who devised the key principles of 'church-growth' in his *Bridges of God* (1955; also McGavran, 1959). Subsequent studies, mostly focusing on churches in the USA, have developed and refined his approach (see, for example, Belew, 1971; Wagner, 1976). As Hopewell recognized, such studies typically assume that congregations may be understood in 'mechanistic' terms – as machines which function according to particular rules. While different writers formulate these rules differently – Wimber, for example, develops Wagner's principles to include the importance of a present-day, charismatic encounter with Christ (Wimber, 1985) – all agree that it is by grasping such rules and adjusting practices accordingly that congregations will grow (for example, Wagner, 1976, p. 159).

Church-growth studies fall into two categories. First, there are those that look at individual congregations in order to discern the empirical evidence on which to base prescriptions for growth. Such evidence, including both attendance levels and attitudinal data, is generally presented in statistical form, offering numerical evidence to support church-growth theories. Second, there are those studies that observe the implementation of church-growth principles by individual churches, and draw conclusions about their efficacy.

The church-growth type of extrinsic study has had a significant but limited impact within the UK. The first church-growth conference was sponsored by the London Bible College in 1978, and Peter Wagner was its guest speaker. The British Church Growth Association was formed three years later. Since then, many evangelical churches have taken up principles from church-growth literature in attempts to enlarge their congregational body, and a few evangelical theologians have developed ideas imported from the USA in light of their own experience (for example, Watson, 1976; Gibbs, 1981). Occasionally such works are used to shed light on parochial particularities

and serve as a kind of congregational study. Other scholars, working in conjunction with churches, have taken on the mechanistic understanding of congregational life advocated by church-growth theorists, while downplaying the American emphasis upon numerical expansion. As such, their work falls into the category of 'church-health', which is explored below, rather than 'church-growth'. Reed's study of how particular congregations develop and transform themselves (*The Dynamics of Religion: Process and Movement in Christian Churches*, 1978) represents an interesting synthesis of both the communitarian and church-growth forms of extrinsic study, since it combines ideas drawn from church-growth literature with a focus on identifying a congregation's responsibility to its wider community.

### *Organizational Studies*

Since the 1980s, studies of congregations from a church-growth perspective have been supplemented by those emerging from the field of organizational studies. Whereas the former tend to be written by active churchmen, the latter generally derive from university departments of management science or applied social science. There are, nevertheless, some interesting similarities in approach. First, both church-growth literature and organizational studies are interested in the effective achievement of goals wider than that of 'understanding' alone. It is this which places them both in the category of 'extrinsic' congregational studies, even though organizational studies tend to be more explicit about what these goals might be, and more systematic in their definition of them. Second, in their preoccupation with efficiency, both types of study focus on the internal operation of congregations rather than on their relationships with wider contexts.

Harris's work is the classic example in the UK. She locates herself within the broad area of 'social administration' (see, for example, *Organising God's Work: Challenges for Churches and Synagogues*, Harris, 1998a), and is therefore committed to a set of issues derived from the concerns of social policy-makers. Although she is concerned to shed light on our understanding of congregations as organizations, she has also focused on the development of 'usable' theory – ideas that may be usefully implemented by decision-makers, whether they are the leaders of organizations or those who work in social policy administration. Congregational studies inspired by this approach display a similar focus on pragmatic objectives and their practical workability, whether in relation to the church as a welfare provider (Harris, 1995; Cameron, 1998) or the management of voluntary work within congregational contexts (Cameron, 1999; see Chapter 10 of this volume).

In their concern with wider questions about how social groups function, some organizational studies of congregations take up part of the agenda of earlier community studies. However, they do not share the latter's social vision, nor the theological agenda of their Catholic counterparts. Moreover, they tend to treat religion as epiphenomenal when it comes to the functioning of congregations. Harris, for example, speaks of the 'religion factor' (Harris, 1995) as though it were a peripheral component rather than an essential aspect

of congregational identity. This approach derives from the underlying assumption that congregations are governed by the same principles as other, non-religious, organizations, and should therefore be subject to the same kind of analysis (Harris, 1998a). In this approach, church members may be considered as 'clients' (Cameron, 2000), and churches as 'voluntary associations' (Harris, 1998b).

### *Church-health*

As mentioned above, the evangelical-inspired church-growth approach has been appropriated only selectively in the UK, and has tended to transmute into an extrinsic approach with a focus on 'church-health' rather than numerical growth. A good example is Lovell and Widdecombe's *Churches and Communities. An Approach to Development in the Local Church* (1978), which focuses on how congregations might develop through a 'non-directive' approach to community development, stressing member empowerment over the paternalistic authority of leaders. The authors conclude that the sixteen churches that took part in their 'action research' benefited from this approach, but that this benefit must be understood in wider terms than church growth alone. It is presented in terms of a healthier pattern of active and collaborative lay/clergy decision-making, an enhancement of relations with local communities and other churches through open discussion, and an engagement with local communities without an overt intent to proselytize.

It is on the other side of the Atlantic that the church-health approach has really flourished, particularly since the 1980s. The pioneering work was Dudley's edited collection, *Building Effective Ministry: Theory and Practice in the Local Church* (1983), which evolved from an experiment carried out in 1981 when a team of scholars and experts descended en masse on 'Wiltshire Church' in the USA. The book is a pioneering example of collaboration between those involved in congregational study, including academics from a range of disciplines, church-growth experts and those active in parish ministry. *Building Effective Ministry* was presented not just as a study for its own sake, but as a practical tool capable of aiding and encouraging others to study their own congregation. The approach was developed in the *Handbook for Congregational Studies*, edited by Carroll *et al.* (1987), several of whose contributors had been involved in the original Wiltshire project. It too was collaborative and inter-disciplinary, incorporated a theological perspective, and was designed as a practical tool for church health and renewal. A revised form of the handbook appeared in 1998, edited by Ammerman *et al.*, entitled *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*. The latter builds on its predecessor by proposing six 'frames' through which congregations should be approached: theology, ecology (context), culture and identity, process/dynamics, resources and leadership.

A church-health approach also characterizes Ammerman *et al.*'s *Congregation and Community* (1997a), which brings together the findings of a team of scholars engaged in the 'Congregations in Changing Communities' project. Together they observed 23 Christian congregations across the USA and gathered questionnaire responses from 1,995 members. The book consists of



detailed descriptions of these congregations, with a particular focus on the ways in which they have responded to change in the wider communities in which they are situated. Its broad conclusion is that those churches that have been willing and able to adapt have remained healthy, while those which have not have suffered, and that both church leaders and laity play a significant role within this process. Ammerman relates her findings to the continuing debate about the health of community in American society.

The church-health approach has had a major impact in the USA, not least by presenting congregational studies as a practical tool which may be employed by clergy and laity as well as specialists and academics. The fruits are evident in the large numbers of projects now carried out by congregations and clergy, and in the growing numbers of MMin and DMin dissertations which build on this approach.<sup>6</sup> As an alternative to the more mechanistic and evangelical church-growth approach, the church-health approach seems better suited to the ecclesiastical climate of the UK. The fact that it has been slow to catch on must therefore be ascribed to other factors, including the general reluctance of the major denominations to engage with congregational studies and to make provision for the subject in their seminaries and training courses. Gradually, however, things are beginning to change. For example, a team of British scholars, some of whom are represented in this volume, are currently planning a handbook for congregational studies that owes much to the inspiration of Carroll and Ammerman, but which is designed for the British context.

### *Theological*

An important development which paralleled the production of extrinsic congregational studies was the growth of 'practical' or 'pastoral' theology in the UK after the 1960s. In part this was a response to the entrance of new secular professionals into the pastoral arena. The rise of liberation theology and other more contextual forms of theological reflection also fed practical theology and helped shape its agenda.

In general, practical theology has encouraged congregational studies by insisting that theology must be done not 'from above' (doctrine imposed on experience) but from below (doctrine explored from the starting point of lived experience), and that the congregation is the core site of Christian experience. A good example of this approach is Browning's *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (1991). This advocates a theological method which begins with a description of a congregation and the situation in which it finds itself, goes on to examine relevant resources from the tradition, and ends with a conversation between the two. The book itself contains studies of a number of congregations in order to illustrate the method proposed. In the UK, Graham's *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (1996) develops

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<sup>6</sup> A further area of development in the USA has used psychological theory to shed light on pastoral issues within congregations. See, for example, Capps (1983, 1990) and Moore (1998).

Browning's work from a feminist and postmodern perspective by arguing that attention to the practice of the faith-community can form the basis of a feminist pastoral theology which takes into account the situated nature of all knowledge and the diversity and fragmentation within and outside these communities, differences that are often overlooked by traditional practical theology.

In the theological realm the rise of feminist theology is also beginning to have some impact on congregational studies. Though feminist theologians have long insisted that theology should arise from women's as well as men's experience, it is only recently that academic theologians like Fulkerson (1994) have interpreted this to mean that they should actually listen to women's voices within Christian congregations. While Fulkerson offers not so much a study of a congregation as of the beliefs and discourses of the women within it, there are some signs that her work is beginning to stimulate a new engagement between theology and congregational studies in the UK. Ward (2000) offers a highly informative empirical study of a congregation in Manchester, England, while seeking to discover what it can reveal of 'the body of Christ' (see also Chapter 9). Clark-King (2003) interviewed working-class women from congregations in Byker, Newcastle, about their religious beliefs and spiritual lives, comparing what she found with the claims about 'women's experience' that are made in academic feminist theology (see also Aune in Chapter 13).

## **Intrinsic Studies**

Clearly a number of extrinsic studies offer such rich descriptions of congregations that they are capable of standing on their own, irrespective of their wider purpose. As such, they might be said to exemplify an intrinsic as well as an extrinsic approach. This section discusses studies that are more narrowly intrinsic; that is, they aim to provide a portrait and analysis of a congregation (or congregations) on its (or their) own terms and for its (or their) own sake.

### *Self-contained*

Hopewell's highly original *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (1987) has been influential on both sides of the Atlantic. In some ways the book is characterized by an extrinsic church-health approach, for part of its aim is to bring new life to congregations by enabling them to understand themselves better. Hopewell also retains at least a residual theological purpose, for he believes that the unique story of each congregation represents 'the immediate outworking of human community redeemed by Christ' (p. 11). But his fascination with parishes for their own sake tends to override any extrinsic aim. The 'symbolic' or 'cultural' approach which he advocates arises from his belief that every congregation has its own meaning, expressed in a story: 'I have begun to see how astonishingly thick and meaning-laden is the actual life of a single local church' (p. 3). Hopewell begins with observations of different

parishes, and offers a myth or story which captures their distinctiveness. His approach is to treat the congregation as a self-contained entity, rather than attempt to relate it to wider contexts.<sup>7</sup>

A similar approach, albeit with a less prominent theological agenda, is evident in another influential American study, Ammerman's *Bible Believers* (1987). The aim of Ammerman's participant observation at 'Southside Gospel Church' was simply to 'listen to how one group of fundamentalists defines itself and how it gives order to the world' (p. 9). Like Hopewell, she sought to uncover the group's shared meanings and assumptions and to see how these are supported by its members' everyday practices and interactions.

This focus on the life and 'culture' of a congregation is also characteristic of many of the congregational studies that have been produced in the UK since the 1980s. Some take in a range of congregations, while others look at a smaller number (or just one) in greater depth.<sup>8</sup>

One of the best examples of the former is Francis's *Church Watch: Christianity in the Countryside* (1996). Francis and his team of ordinand researchers studied the churches in ten rural deaneries (subdivisions of an Anglican diocese) in England in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Researchers attended all the services at a church on a given weekend and, guided by a checklist, observed as many aspects as possible of service, congregation and setting. In *Church Watch* Francis simply gathers together these descriptions (no doubt with skilful editing) and offers them, without comment, to the reader. Analysis is confined to a short postscript at the end of the book, where he does no more than pose a series of questions about the challenges that these rural churches face and the ways in which they may – or may not – be equipped to face them. Francis's emphasis 'is on *displaying* the strengths and weaknesses of rural chapels and rural churches rather than *judging* their performance', and on showing 'how things really are in the present' (pp. viii, x; original emphases). In this way, Francis moves away from the extrinsic, ecclesiological concerns of the *Faith in the Countryside* report, published six years earlier, and from the survey techniques of the Rural Church Project, published by Davies, Watkins and Winter as *Church and Religion in Rural England* in 1991. All tap into a topical concern about religion in rural contexts, but Francis's study favours the

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<sup>7</sup> While Hopewell's influence is widespread in congregational studies, only a few authors (for example, Wind, 1993) have followed his approach comprehensively.

<sup>8</sup> Some self-contained intrinsic studies also include an historical dimension. In the UK nearly every local church has a pamphlet on the history of church and parish, often written by a local historian. Studies that take the history up to the present are far less common. In the USA an interesting example is furnished by Wind and Lewis's edited collection *American Congregations* (1994, Vol. 1), which offers historical portraits of twelve religious communities, both Christian and non-Christian. Dolan's *The American Catholic Parish: A History from 1850 to the Present* (2 vols, 1987) is similar in approach, while his *The American Catholic Experience* (1992) draws on local materials to tell the story of five hundred years of American Catholicism from the perspective of the ordinary parishioner.

presentation of self-contained congregational profiles, seeking understanding for understanding's sake.

Several of the more in-depth self-contained studies of congregational life that have appeared in the UK in recent years pay particular attention to matters of worship, ritual and 'performance'. For example, in *On the Perception of Worship* (1999) Stringer explores the ways in which members of four congregations in Manchester, England, experience and understand their worship. He identifies key elements in each: narrative and story in a liberal intellectual Baptist congregation; habit and tradition in a Roman Catholic church; the conversion experience in a charismatic community; and festival in an Anglican inner-city church. Stringer analyses worship as the site in which these key elements are re-enacted and reconstituted over time, a process shaped by local congregational cultures as well as by trends in liturgy and tradition. In this way he builds on studies such as Cotton and Stevenson's *On the Receiving End* (1996), which explores Christian worship in terms of the experiences of individual participants. Stringer's concern, however, is not with individuals alone but with congregational cultures, accessed through participant observation and analysed using anthropological theories of meaning and ritual significance.

A focus on ritual praxis is also important in Coleman's study of the Word of Life Ministry in Sweden (Coleman, 2000). His concern is to characterize the 'habitus' or 'embodied disposition' of this large and successful charismatic congregation. He presents a wide-ranging study which offers 'an ethnographic appreciation of charismatic constructions of the person, of sociality, even of space and time' (p. 6). He considers not only the beliefs, narratives and practices of the community, but their material culture as well, including their art, architecture and deployment of money, demonstrating the importance of a globalizing context in shaping the charismatic identity of this particular congregation.

Retaining an interest in charismatic groups, but taking power as his conceptual focus, Percy has recently published a congregational study of the Toronto Airport Church, home of the infamous Toronto Blessing (Percy, 2004). He draws on empirical and theoretical material offered in previous works, including empirical data on congregations in northern England (Percy, 1996; 1998). The charismatic evangelical tradition is also the subject of Guest's study of a thriving Anglican congregation in northern England (2002b). Guest analyses how the value changes associated with late modernity are managed and contained within a congregational setting, paying particular attention to the role of small groups and the establishment of 'alternative', post-evangelical groups as sites for the negotiation of evangelical identity (see also Guest, 2002a). He also addresses the role of the public discourse of the congregation as both a mirror of congregational identity and a tool used in the minimization of internal conflict (see Chapter 5).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Stromberg presents a comparable argument in his study of Immanuel Church, Stockholm (Stromberg, 1986).

### Typologizing

There are, of course, few congregational studies that do not offer or assume some categorization of congregations. The simplest are based on denominational categories (Lutheran, Anglican, Catholic, and so on) or the categories of churchmanship (liberal, conservative, radical, for example). When a study encompasses several congregations, it is sometimes possible to offer a fresh typology which attempts to shed new light by cutting the cake in a somewhat different way. In some cases this may constitute a, or even *the*, main contribution of the work.

The most influential cluster of typologizing studies come from the USA and take their rise from what Marty called the 'great divide' between liberal and evangelical. In his study of a congregation in Mendocino, north California, Warner (1988) proposed a typology which cross-cut horizontal categories of liberal and evangelical with vertical ones of 'institutional' and 'nascent' orientation.<sup>10</sup> This typology is developed from an earlier version proposed by Roozen, McKinney and Carroll in *Varieties of Religious Presence* (1984). The two may be correlated in the following way:

Warner		Roozen <i>et al.</i>
Institutional liberalism	=	The 'civic' orientation
Institutional evangelicalism	=	The 'sanctuary' orientation
Nascent liberalism	=	The 'activist' orientation
Nascent evangelicalism	=	The 'evangelistic' orientation

In an article arising from the 'Congregations in Changing Communities' research project, Ammerman (1997b) offers a further variation by categorizing American Christians as 'Activist', 'Golden Rule' or 'Evangelical'. Activists characterize the Christian life in terms of social action and working for justice. Golden Rule Christians in terms of doing good deeds, and Evangelical Christians in terms of 'being saved'.

Becker has recently proposed a further development of this typology in her *Congregations in Conflict* (1999). On the basis of her study of 23 different congregations in the USA, Becker concluded that most internal conflict was directly related to clashes between different local understandings of congregational identity. She identifies four main understandings:

- 1 'House of worship': congregation as provider of religious goods and services to individuals;
- 2 'Family': congregation as provider of close-knit and supportive relationships for members;

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<sup>10</sup> Although Warner studied only one congregation, he studied it over several phases of its historical development, during which it moved through different 'types' of churchmanship.

- 3 'Community': congregation as a democratic forum which supports its members while also expressing their values in social programmes;
- 4 'Leader': congregation as an activist, mission-focused community of values led by pastor or denomination.<sup>11</sup>

Becker suggests that the most intractable conflicts occur when two or more of these types are represented in a single congregation.

In the UK, Woodhead and Heelas (2000) have proposed an alternative three-fold typology which distinguishes between religions of difference, religions of humanity and spiritualities of life. The first locate authority in external forms of transcendent obligation, the last in the depths of inner subjectivity, and religions of humanity locate authority in 'the human' and human values. Although this typology was developed in order to make sense of religions in the modern world more generally, it can also be applied to Christian congregations, and is beginning to be used in this way (see, for example, Aune, Chapter 13 and Heelas and Woodhead, 2004).

### *Contextualizing*

Contextualizing intrinsic studies are those which seek to relate congregations to their wider socio-cultural contexts, but have no wider or pragmatic agenda. They generally seek to illuminate both church and wider society with reference to one another. Contextualizing studies are the most obviously sociological of congregational studies, particularly those large-scale studies that situate congregations in relation to broad social trends. Smaller-scale contextualizing studies seek only to relate the congregation to its local context, and these tend to adopt anthropological methods. Both forms of study have been well represented in Britain since the 1970s.

*Small-scale – local context* One of the earliest small-scale contextualizing studies in the UK came out of the Scottish context in the early 1970s. Directed by the sociologist of religion Sissons, *The Social Significance of Church Membership in the Burgh of Falkirk* (1973) was a thorough study of all the congregations in the town and made use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods.<sup>12</sup> It was a collaborative project commissioned by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and the departments of Social Anthropology and Christian Ethics and Practical Theology at the University of

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<sup>11</sup> Becker notes that this typology is close to that of Mock (1992). Mock, in turn, derives his categories from Roozen *et al.* (1984).

<sup>12</sup> This study stands within a tradition that may be traced back much further, at least to Chalmers's *The Christian and Civic Economy of Large Towns* (1821). Chalmers used social scientific methods and gathered statistics from the Glasgow area to demonstrate the correlation between working-class culture and the growing irreligion associated with city life (Brown, 2001, p. 23). Highly respected among evangelical churchmen, Chalmers's methods of interpretation influenced the presentation of the 1851 census on religious worship.

Edinburgh. As well as providing detailed information about the life and beliefs of the congregations in Falkirk, the study looked for correlations between church membership and a range of variables, including class, work and politics. The study was influenced by Lenski's research in Detroit (1963), which found that 'the religious factor' was key to the acquisition of social and economic values, especially in combination with other social factors such as ethnicity and communalism. Though ethnicity and communalism were not major factors in Falkirk, Sissons found a significant correlation between church membership and socio-economic status, political attitudes, involvement in voluntary associations and attitudes to work. He also discovered significant differences not only between denominations, but also between two main forms of church membership: 'communal' and 'associational', a contrast which builds on Troeltsch's model of church and sect and Tonnies's (1955) distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (community and association).

The small-scale sociological approach was advanced in Britain by a number of works, including Clark's *Between Pulpit and Pew* (1982), which offered a contextualizing study of a Yorkshire fishing village. Clark traces the relationships between religion in church and chapel and religion as manifest in non-institutional or 'folk' forms, arguing that both persist because they retain a legitimating function, investing meaning in the everyday experiences of local residents. Jenkins's *Religion in English Everyday Life* (1999) is more influenced by anthropological than sociological method.<sup>13</sup> This study of a village and its church in west Cambridgeshire and a Whit Walk in East Bristol is purely ethnographic in approach, seeks no statistical correlations, and proceeds from the author's long-term immersion in these communities. For Jenkins, the study of congregations and local communities is inseparable, for he defines religion as a form of collective self-imagining and self-worship which 'presents visions of social flourishing: of right social order and of what it is to be human' (p. 36). Jenkins therefore explores the meanings of congregations by moving outside the religious community itself and situating it within its socio-cultural locality, exploring local meanings and the place of religion within them. The distinction in the Cambridgeshire village of Comberton between 'villagers' and old and new 'incomers' causes tension, as the church finds itself caught between conflicting 'economies of fantasy' about the village, within each of which it has a different place. In Bristol, the organizing ideal is that of 'respectability' and part of the role of the church is to represent symbolically the virtues of control, sobriety, continence and thrift, which are both religious and social (see Jenkins, Chapter 8).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Jenkins's work also stands within the tradition of British community studies. His analysis of Comberton village, Cambridgeshire, for example, shows some similarities with Stacey's study of Banbury (1960), and Jenkins himself makes reference to this tradition in his reflections on method (1999, p. 91).

<sup>14</sup> Though it really belongs to the 'extrinsic' category, Allan's congregational study *The Face of My Parish* (1954) is an early insider (minister) account of a Church of Scotland parish in Glasgow which displays interesting similarities to 'situating' studies

Continuing the Scottish tradition, Dowie offers a contextualizing study of a single congregation in his ethnography of 'Riverstane' Church. In an early article, Dowie (1997) concentrates on this church as a centre of civic status, distinctive as an exclusivist institution resistant to change. While this resistance reinforces the boundaries which consolidate congregational identity, it also exacerbates processes of church decline. He develops his ethnography into a book-length congregational study (Dowie, 2002), which combines an intrinsic use of ethnographic methods, including the development of indigenous categories, and an extrinsic application of gathered insights to issues in pastoral theology. His work bridges the two kinds of approach, paying attention to local cultures, while retaining an understanding of congregational culture as the outcome of interaction among members of a group, their context, and the ethnographer himself (cf. Ward, Chapter 9).

*Large-scale – wider social context* Small-scale contextualizing studies have been produced steadily in Britain since the 1970s. They take their place alongside a number of examples from the USA, including those by Williams (1974) and Eisland (1998). Though large-scale studies are rarer, here too there seems to be greater productivity in the UK than there is for many other types of congregational study.

The work of Bryan Wilson, David Martin, Grace Davie, Steve Bruce and Robin Gill may be mentioned in this context. Though few of these authors have devoted much time to formal empirical study of particular congregations, all of them make reference to congregations in their work, and all attempt to relate them to wider social trends. Their main concern is to establish links between congregational decline and aspects of modernization.<sup>15</sup> Though this is most often done in general terms, some of these sociologists of religion also attempt to relate variable rates of congregational (or denominational) decline to differences between types of congregation (or denomination). Thus Bruce relates the more rapid decline of liberal as compared to conservative congregations to the latter's greater ability to transmit clear and strict teachings to their own members as well as to potential converts (Bruce, 1989).

Bruce's argument is influenced by the work of Peter Berger and Dean Kelley in the USA, both of whom regard the move from 'strict' to 'liberal' Christianity (to use Kelley's typology) as a trend which leads inexorably to secularization, as Christianity loses its distinctness from the wider culture. Both Berger and Kelley paid attention to congregations as well as to individual belief in framing

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such as Jenkins (1999) and Dowie (2002). Allan explains the failure of his church to assimilate new members with reference to the difference in culture between the church and its surrounding locality, finding a clash between two secular cultures: that of the local working classes, and that of the church's bourgeoisie, concerned with values like respectability, stability and security.

<sup>15</sup> Robin Gill has also devoted a great deal of time to establishing precise figures for church decline in Britain, sometimes looking at specific congregations in doing so. See, for example, Gill (2003).



this argument, though they did not themselves engage in formal empirical research. The connection between liberal congregations and decline has also been explored in a number of works of historical sociology, for example Wuthnow (1988) and Roof and McKinney (1987), both of which derive their evidence chiefly from large-scale survey data. In many ways Warner (1988) provides the best example of how this sort of argument can be grounded in congregational study, as he finds a direct correlation in the Mendocino Church between liberalization and decline and de-liberalization and growth.

At this point it is also worth mentioning Bellah *et al.*'s *Habits of the Heart* (1985), which generalizes about the state of contemporary American culture on the basis of empirical study which includes a number of studies of congregations, including those undertaken by Tipton. But given its central concern with the 'state of the [American] nation', and in particular with the dissolution of community and civic society by the acids of both 'expressive' and 'utilitarian' individualism, this study belongs to the extrinsic as much as the intrinsic category.

Here one might also note the work of Flory and Miller (2000), whose edited volume on *GenX Religion* includes a number of congregation-based studies which proceed from the assumption that religious identity in postmodern times is shaped by generational as well as cultural factors.<sup>16</sup> The wider context includes the deregulation of tradition in postmodernity, which has allowed local groups to reconfigure their presentation of the Gospel in line with the affinities of youth subcultures. As such, congregations become sites for the constitution of novel religious forms, which conflate and combine previously antagonistic spheres. For example, Jensen (2000) offers an illuminating picture of Committed Christian Fellowship, an evangelical, California-based congregation which affirms biblical literalism and moral conservatism while embracing punk-rock culture. Consideration of the deregulation of religion in postmodernity has also provoked reflection on cultural forms which may possibly take the place of congregations in offering an alternative sense of religious identity. In Britain Lynch (2002) has explored the possibility that a sense of spiritual community is forged within nightclubs, clubbers turning to youth culture for the sense of meaning they fail to find in traditional Christian congregations.

### *Multi-focused*

The final category of congregational study is reserved for those that combine two or more of the approaches outlined above. Depending on the nature of the combination, a multi-focused study may be primarily extrinsic or intrinsic in orientation.

Some of the large-scale contextualizing studies mentioned above fall into this broad category, at least in so far as they combine a church-growth (or church-

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<sup>16</sup> For a generational approach to congregational studies, see also Carroll and Roof (2002).

health) approach with a typologizing one. While studies like Kelley's *Why Conservative Churches are Growing* (1972) cross two types, however, truly multi-focused studies combine even more. Tipton's *Getting Saved from the Sixties* (1982) works with at least three of the approaches outlined above. Tipton studied three religious communities in California, including the Living Word Fellowship (LWF), a 'born-again, spirit-filled, revival church' of some three hundred members in a modest suburb of San Francisco (p. 31). As well as offering intrinsic, self-contained studies of these communities, Tipton both typologizes and contextualizes them by relating them to wider cultural trajectories. In addition, he considers reasons for their success, bound up with their appeal to baby-boomers disillusioned with the counter-culture of the 1960s. The richness of his descriptions and his concern to understand the moral economy of these different communities suggests an intrinsic approach, while his desire to throw light on contemporary American culture and, even more ambitiously, to 'help us clarify our moral commitments in the face of the hard realities ahead' (as Bellah puts it in the Foreword, p. xi), indicates an extrinsic concern.

Though somewhat less intensely multi-layered, Miller's study of Calvary Chapel, Vineyard Christian Fellowship and Hope Chapel in *Reinventing American Protestantism* (1997) and Tamney's study of four congregations in Indiana in *The Resilience of Conservative Religion* (2001) also fall into the 'multi-focused' category. Miller's starting point is self-consciously extrinsic. His interest in these churches arises from his own theological journey and a concern with wider issues of church growth and decline. Like Kelley, Miller is interested in why mainline liberalism has declined while conservative denominations have grown. But unlike Kelley, his focus falls on a new variation in this pattern, namely the exceptional success of churches which combine elements of conservative religion (such as supernaturalism and literalist Bible teaching) with more progressive elements (fostering individual empowerment and loose 'postmodern organisational structures' rather than paternalistic authority, p. 9). These churches are normally labelled 'charismatic' or 'Pentecostal', but Miller believes that such categorization is no longer adequate to the movements he is looking at – hence his claim that they represent a 'new paradigm' in Protestantism. His task is to describe them and what is new about them, to situate them in relation to wider cultural trends, to account for their success, and to spell out the lessons which can be learned by other forms of Christianity. Tamney does something very similar, though his work is based on the study of a range of separate, smaller local congregations, each of which is characterized by recent numerical growth. What they all have in common, he discovers – contra Bruce, Berger and Kelley – is not 'strictness' or a resistance to modernization, but the ability to accommodate it. Tamney finds that 'modernized traditionalism' is what is doing well, chiefly because it has been able to accommodate such central elements of late modernity as structural differentiation, an affluence ethic and a therapeutic self-realization ethos.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> For similar observations in relation to the Women's Aglow movement see Griffith (1997).

In the UK, the Kendal Project was influenced by multi-focused studies such as these, and shares something of their approach. It too was concerned to research and to categorize the different types of religion and spirituality on the ground in a single location (the town of Kendal in northwest Britain), and it too was partly concerned to assess and compare their relative rates of growth and decline and to offer an explanation. Its main finding was that it was those forms of religiosity which were able to attend to, heal and resource the subjective lives of individuals by bringing them into relation with the sacred that were proving most successful. By contrast, those that demanded that individuals conform to external sources of transcendent authority and live life in prescribed roles were doing least well. Congregational study in Kendal revealed that almost all the congregations still demanded a high degree of conformity and deference, and that the congregational domain had suffered massive decline since the 1970s. By contrast, holistic forms of spirituality in Kendal, which were almost uniformly devoted to resourcing subjective life, were found to have exploded since the late 1980s (Heelas and Woodhead, 2004).

## **Conclusion**

Congregational studies in Britain have moved through two distinct phases. The first, through the 1950s and 1960s, was more extrinsic in orientation, while the second, since the 1970s, has been more intrinsic. In the former, studies displayed considerable concern about the breakdown of integrated community and the role – actual or potential – that the churches might play in relation to social cohesion and collapse. This reflected and was perhaps triggered by the post-war concern for the reclamation and reinvigoration of national identity and local community.<sup>18</sup>

Whilst American congregational studies have continued to be deeply engaged with these extrinsic concerns, the second phase of British studies displays a rather different orientation. Those who study congregations now come from a wide range of academic backgrounds, and their aim is generally to understand the socio-cultural characteristics of the group that is being studied for the sake of understanding. Of course the results of such study may be useful to those making decisions about the future of these groups, but such practical application is not the primary aim of the research.

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<sup>18</sup> The fact that US studies have retained a consistently extrinsic focus throughout the twentieth century, while UK ones have not, may also relate to the different experiences of the Second World War on either side of the Atlantic. The war constituted a threat to a sense of national identity and community cohesion to a far greater degree in the UK, leading to a post-war quest for the reclamation of community. The North American tradition was driven by other factors, maintaining an extrinsic drive within congregational studies that suggests a continuity stretching from the Chicago School to Robert Putnam, characterized by the exercise of sociology in the service of a greater community.

There may be many explanations for this shift towards an intrinsic approach. One is simply that there appears to be a lower degree of anxiety about social cohesion and social capital in Britain than in America today (at least if one takes as an index the number of 'state of the nation' studies emerging from both countries). Another is simply that congregations in Britain, as in most of Europe, have now declined to such a point that it has become implausible to claim that they have great relevance to the formulation and exploration of wider questions about society. If social capital is under threat, it is unlikely that congregations will be turned to as the place where a solution will be found, either by policy-makers or the population at large. The UK is simply no longer a Christian country in the way the USA may still claim to be.

As the following chapter will make clear, congregational studies in the UK today suffer from severe disadvantages compared to their counterparts in the USA, not least a chronic shortage of funding. As the other studies in this book indicate, however, there are also rich opportunities in the contemporary situation. Those who study congregations in Britain today find themselves at a unique historical moment in which many congregations face collapse and extinction. This brings with it particular responsibilities: to study how congregations face this situation; to understand and explain why congregational decline has occurred; to illuminate the ways in which congregations maintain their distinctive life in the face of hostility or indifference; to explain why some congregations (and other forms of spiritual group) are managing to survive better than others. Only in twenty years or so, when the next chapter in the history of congregational studies in the UK comes to be written, will it become clear whether or not its practitioners have managed to rise to the challenge.

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